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# SEE(M)ING STRANGE: METHODOLOGIES OF MEMORY AND HOME

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on the stranger, and Anne-Marie Fortier's approach to remembering home, this article argues for a methodology of memory and migration that would explore individuals' encounters between lived spatiotemporalities without affirming a migrant ontology. I look to my ethnographic research on diasporic narratives among migrants from former Yugoslavia in the United Kingdom to ask how recounted memories of home might be bound up in but not confined to the experience of migration. Exploring mnemonic journeys that go beyond dichotomies of displaced origins and strange new homelands, I suggest that stories of embodied sensory experience can make visible people's encounters with forms of difference: both in the past home, which loses its ontological fixity, and in the process of inhabiting a "diaspora space" (Brah 1996), which comes with its own narratives and trajectories of being a stranger.

## **Keywords:**

home, memory, strangers, sensory, Yugoslavia, Britain, socialism, diaspora space

How does 'migration' affect the way people draw on the past in narratives of home, without necessarily upholding a territorialised dichotomy of mobility and immobility? The present article is based on ethnographic research conducted in the United Kingdom on diasporic narratives of the past among migrants from the former Yugoslavia and their children. Like the conference panel from which it emerged, it responds to the insights of recent multidisciplinary work conducted on the relationship between memory and migration (Creel

and Kitzmann 2011), theories of transnational memory (De Cesari and Rigney 2014) and “traveling” memory (Erll 2011). What these debates have in common is a negative interlocutor of memory as bounded and emplaced, the sense that “time is the only movement which memory tolerates” (Creet 2011: 5), epitomised by Pierre Nora and the influence his work has wielded over much of the cultural memory studies boom of the previous decades (Erll 2011). This flourishing literature resonates in part with those projects within migration scholarship that have attempted to “nuance the migrant experience” (Osella and Osella 2007) rather than taking migration for granted as an unrivalled transformative event entailing entirely new subjectivities or social processes, and which look instead to how migration is experienced as one aspect of change in relation to others. Such approaches necessarily speak to a tradition of viewing migration as “a *problem* that needs to be ‘fixed’” (Castles 2010: 1567) on the one hand, and on the other, to those theorisations of migration and diaspora that emphasise hybrid identities marked by historical experiences of movement, which resist becoming untangled (Gilroy 1993, Hall 1993).

One of the key aspects of this debate is the question of whether ‘home’ can always be presumed to be that which people leave behind in the act of migrating. Feminist scholars have repeatedly pointed out that ‘home’ is not necessarily always a site of safety or a locus of positive feeling (Brah 1996, Ahmed et al 2003), while, as Osella and Osella remind us, “migrant ambivalence about home need not be a product of migration” (2007: 147) but can pre-date migration or shape how the act comes to be experienced by individuals. At the same time, the idea of home as a place “where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders” (Kondo 1996: 97) retains a strong hold on the scholarly as well as popular imagination, as does the sense that migrating across *national* lines holds a particular weight with regard to how ‘outsiders’ are identified.

In this article I reflect on my ethnographic fieldwork to address the question of what constitutes a ‘methodology’ for studying the relationship between memory, migration, and ‘home’. When thinking through my ethnography I have had to contend not only with the migration exceptionalism referenced above, but also with a long-established tendency to view post-socialism as contiguous with a sense of historical break symbolised by the post-Cold War idiom of ‘transition’. Furthermore, while the break-up of the former Yugoslav state has been interpreted within the larger paradigm of post-socialism, it has also, due to the

nature of the wars which accompanied it, frequently been viewed as inevitable (Rusinow 2003) or described in the register of simmering “ethnic hatreds” (Goldsworthy 2002).

My primary challenge has thus been to locate my interlocutors’ narratives of belonging in relation to both a shared Yugoslav past, now refracted through the historical shifts and ruptures of the twentieth century, as well as through the experience of migration and subsequent home-making within a context that, as Srdja Pavlovic puts it in relation to his own experience of Canada as a “Montenegrin-Canadian”, “demands that I conceptualize myself in relation to it” (2011: 47). To this end I focus on instances of memory talk among my interlocutors that assert an attachment to a past home whereby a belief in its inherent characteristic as a place where one need not explain oneself becomes impossible to sustain, not only as a consequence of migration and the changes this implies, but as a fundamental condition of the home left behind.

Two key themes emerge throughout the article: first, a preponderance of sensory imagery in such memory talk, and the evocation of a sensorial misalignment between the speaker and the past home; and second, the way that my interlocutors frequently attach their remembering to the experiences of “homing” (Brah 1996: 193) in a new place, not as a reductive baseline for comparison but as a process evoking a sense of strangeness as well as surprising moments of alignment. So, for instance, encouraging British-born children to establish links a parental homeland by encouraging them to learn about ‘their culture’ is a means of keeping alive the memory of a past home, but it is also legitimated as raising a new generation of multicultural British citizens. Uniting around beloved songs might present an opportunity to recapture a former sense of harmony for Bosnians displaced by war – yet the question of language and pronunciation emerges as a jarring note, triggering memories that prove ‘Bosnian’ does and never did mean the same thing to all people. At the same time, recalling moments of encountering visible ‘difference’ on the streets of London can evoke comparisons with the former home, where presumed strangers are also revealed to be unexpectedly familiar.

I address the issue of methodologies on two interconnected levels. The first stems from my reflection on the process of seeking out people’s stories of home through the lens of ‘the past’ while working in the context of former Yugoslavia, where such stories are

characterized by complex histories of solidarity but also by systematic processes of cultural differentiation, memories of everyday conviviality as well as violent upheaval. By refusing to focus on any single 'community' living in Britain – of Bosnians, Croats, Serbs, and so on – I wanted to avoid reifying the narrative of irreconcilable 'ethnic' difference that plagues the question of Yugoslavia to this day. At the same time, people's lived experiences, including their national identification, class background, age, or which Yugoslav republic they or their families once lived in, influence the way they call upon this past even if no one axis can shape it definitively. As my research unfolded, it led me to think more laterally about the ways in which the past might become visible in my interlocutors' narratives: an ad hoc methodology born out of the gradual process of realising that such stories might not look quite the way I had initially expected them to.

The second inflection that 'methodologies' carries is the work that narratives of homes do for my interlocutors. How do references to a past home evoke displacements that are not necessarily about migration, but are nevertheless bound up in the experience of migration? How do memories of the past make visible, or sensible, those qualities about the past home that reveal it as always having been less immobile than one had assumed? Do such memories make the present more or less inhabitable, or familiar? To explore some of the underlying issues these questions evoke, I will first draw on several critical approaches to 'home' that have proven particularly useful for making sense of my ethnographic conversations.

### **Homes out of place**

The core tension running throughout much of the theoretical work on memory and migration is that while memory is inherently unmoored from any single or static framework of production or intelligibility, we cannot help but feel that there is something qualitatively different about memory in the context of the migration of people. The very fact that it is the metaphor of movement that is often called upon to make this point – making memory 'mobile', or inherently a 'traveller' – is significant for what it implies about the concept of movement as an ontological quality. In *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed draws on the idiom of the alien – both as an extra-terrestrial other and as a person defined by law as not

belonging within a national border – to argue against an ontology of strangers as “a mechanism for allowing us to face that which we have already designated as the beyond” (2000: 3). Assuming that it is possible simply to be, or to recognize a stranger, is a form of “stranger fetishism” (2000: 3-6), a displacement which severs the figure of the stranger from the historical and material circumstances of its determination. Rejecting the celebratory appropriation of the stranger in those strands of postmodern theory that call for a recognition of being ‘a stranger’ as a universal condition, Ahmed argues that we require ways of thinking that do not conceal those processes which make some strangers and some bodies stranger than others. Central to the classic idea of the stranger is the concept of emplacement and of home, and alongside them, the feeling that home is a place which one can leave behind. In this framing it is not the home that is mobile, but merely the body. For Ahmed, however, the assumed opposition between “home and away” should give way to an understanding of the difference between being at home and leaving home, which does not enforce an ontology of home as “stasis of being” (2000: 88-89).

Scholars working on diaspora have recognized the close entanglement of spaces and temporalities, in the idioms of diasporas’ altered pasts and never-there homelands (Clifford 1994; Hirsch and Miller 2011). But it is Avtar Brah who has been most instrumental in bringing to bear a complex vision of what a “diaspora space” (1996: 181) might entail, not merely as a space in which migrants settle, but as the “intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location” where “homing desires” (1996: 193) come to be enacted. For Brah, diasporic homing desire is distinct from desire for the homeland – as “[discourse] of fixed origins” (1996: 193) – in that it describes a multivalent project that might be oriented by memories of dislocation, but could just as well signify hope and new possibilities. Here ‘feeling at home’ exists in tension with being seen to be at home, or with staking the right to inhabit somewhere as a home. The diasporic thus dwells in those acts of home-making that take place around collective imagined journeys, in a ‘diaspora space’ such as Britain that itself bears the marks of multiple contestations and alliances around what it means to belong, to be ‘native’ or ‘Other’.

Ahmed draws on Brah extensively when exploring the simultaneous meaning that home contains as both “a mythic space of desire in the diasporic imagination” and “*the lived experience of totality*” (emphasis in original), which does not represent a foreclosed and

fully constituted space of origin but rather “defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers” (2000: 89). Home here is interior rather than exterior to the person, made up of embodied sense-memory as well as a discursive idea.<sup>1</sup> For Ahmed, there is an analogy to be drawn between place and memory that lies in the very impossibility of their return:

The experience of leaving home in migration is hence always about the *failure of memory to make sense of the place one comes to inhabit*, a failure that is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a migrant body, a body that feels out of place. The process of returning home is likewise about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way by that which appears as familiar. (Ahmed 2000: 91, emphasis in original)

How might memory be embodied even without a literal return ‘home’? Ahmed and Brah have both been influential for Anne-Marie Fortier’s (2003) work on “motions of attachment”, which Fortier locates within narratives that recall ‘originary’ homes. Writing about queer migration stories and the relationships to childhood homes which they produce, Fortier shows that ‘returning’ to a past home through its recollection can mean encountering both familiarity and estrangement in what one had considered fixed. For instance, personal stories about queerness and migration, predicated on the assumption that migration can bring about the possibility for people to “reassess their childhoods” (Cant 1997 quoted in Fortier 2003: 120), can instead serve as a way of shifting the image one had of this childhood, as Bob Cant does in his own narrative by re-membering his hometown as having been populated with fellow outsiders. Requiring both attachment and movement, Fortier’s take on re-membering implies a journeying between homes that populates them with difference, denying the originary home any ontological or foundational reality. She writes: “[re-membering] is lived in motions, the motions of journeying between homes, the motions of hailing ghosts from the past, the motions of leaving and staying put, of ‘moving on’ or ‘going back’, the motions of cutting or adding, the motions of continual reprocessing of what home is/was/might have been” (2003: 131). Re-membering thus involves journeys

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Avtar Brah’s evocative “meditation” on the London suburb of Southall is titled ‘The Scent of Memory: Strangers’, Our Own, and Others” (1999).

of memory that are not simple returns, but that connect the past and present via the embodied experience of inhabitations and dislocations: strangers', our own, and others'.

### **(Post-)Yugoslav narratives of home and belonging**

The question of what home might have been, as well as what it is and what it was, remains crucial to former Yugoslavia and the questions it raises about belonging. The story of collective identity formation in the region is a complex one, tangled up in histories of migration, occupation, empire, and more recently, various attempts to construct a South Slav state.<sup>2</sup> The historical production of 'nationhood', variably organized around ideas about communal language and dialect, religious identification, naming conventions and cultural traditions, characterizes a "Balkan Babel" (Ramet 2002) that has been authoritatively seen as the inevitable cause of Yugoslavia's downfall on the one hand, or romanticized as a bygone 'multiethnic' utopia on the other. Recent edited volumes have broadened the discussion on 'post-Yugoslavia' by analysing the political, economic, and social relations that characterize its aftermath (Hudson and Bowman 2012), addressing ways of remembering everyday life in Yugoslavia (Luthar and Pušnik 2010), or by employing a reflexive perspective on the meaning and idea of Yugoslavia from the point of view of the present (Abazović and Velikonja 2014, Gorup 2013). At the same time, multiple ethnographies coming out of the region are emphasising that people's sense of the present-day and future have become mediated via a relationship to the Yugoslav past that somehow refuses to be made wholly irrelevant (Velikonja 2008, Petrović 2010a, 2010b, Kurtović 2011, Jansen 2015).

The very fragmented nature of migration from former Yugoslavia to the United Kingdom, which formed the basis of my research, ranges from the arrival of largely Serbian political émigrés post-World War II, through to occasional migrants in the 1960s to the 1970s who moved for reasons of employment or education, to the mostly Bosnian refugees arriving in the 1990s along with displaced persons from other parts of the region, and finally the more recent migrations after the end of the war. It thus gives rise to a multiplicity of narratives about the past. At the same time, the multifarious legacies of post-imperial migratory histories in the United Kingdom provide a tapestry of narratives around difference and

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the historical construction and experience of Yugoslavism, see Djokić et al 2003.



belonging into which all migrants must emplace themselves. Over the year and a half of my fieldwork I sought out individuals and organisations aimed at people from the former Yugoslav region, mostly in London but with several trips to other parts of the country. The majority of my fieldwork, at least in terms of sustained and repeated contact, was conducted with people from Bosnia, most through not all of whom identified as Bosnian Muslims;<sup>3</sup> but I also encountered a number of people from other parts of Yugoslavia, all of whom had diverse stories and reasons for ending up in the United Kingdom.

Through my engagement with community organisations, I took part in several commemorative events and celebrations, many of which were organized under the aegis of Bosnian supplementary schools – weekend projects designed to teach children and young people about Bosnian language and culture – or the associations linked with them. My first encounter with the schools’ joint mission of pedagogy and community formation occurred at the annual summer meet-up of Bosnian supplementary schools in Britain, which I attended just before the start of my fieldwork period. The day unfolded largely in the sign of Bosnia as motherland: speeches, including that by the Bosnian ambassador, emphasized the need for children to speak their mother tongue, while others stressed the connection between language and the preservation of Bosnia in the children’s hearts and memories.

This did not mean, however, that such commemorative events reinforced only a backward-looking vision of home(land) as a symbolic place of origin. The overlap between teaching children and the appeal to a wider remembrance of Bosnianness continued to be a notable feature of other large events organized by the London-based school later that year. The London branch of the school was where I volunteered regularly, and the one I came to know most intimately. Since it represented an important nexus of organized Bosnian community in London, as well as having access to an auditorium in the centre where it rented space, the school hosted not only curriculum-specific events but also commemorations of public Bosnian holidays, including Statehood Day, Independence Day, and International Women’s Day (which is no longer a state holiday in Bosnia, but nevertheless features strongly each year). At both events the program included requisite speeches from notables as well as

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<sup>3</sup> As discussed also by Ryan-Saha (2015).

readings by poets from the community, one or two of whom had travelled from other countries for the occasion.

The speeches were largely undeviating in their linking of collective memory and national affinity to the pedagogical mission of the school, but there were some departures from the narrative. While a speaker from the embassy emphasized the importance of children learning their language and being proud of Bosnia, one of the school's teachers chose to highlight the importance of language learning with reference to academic success in English schools, and called on parents to enrol their children in a GCSE homework club she was trying to organize alongside the regular program. This tendency to frame the mission of the Bosnian school in terms of 'multicultural competency' and as integral to the formation of good *British* subjects appeared again in my interactions with teachers from the school, as well as in conversations with some of the parents. Later that day, one of the poets recited a poem in which she evoked a self-consciously multi-directional attachment to her different homes: she described missing Bosnia in London and thinking of London in Bosnia, wrapped up in the metaphor of a suitcase. 'Home' here was no longer in the singular, just as the teacher's interjection of English schools and English success made it impossible to view children's attachment to Bosnianness only in terms of collectively remembered origin.

Most striking, however, were those evocations of home that occurred outside the direct remit of pedagogical remembering. Here I return to the notion present in both Ahmed and Fortier, of home as something which is inhabited by and inhabits the senses. As Fortier points out, looking back at a place that was once experienced as immutable can reveal the fact that difference was in fact always already present. Yet mnemonic returns do not necessarily produce increased feelings of familiarity or hominess. As became clear in my interactions, such journeys of memory can also serve to show that the home left behind – be it Bosnia, Serbia, Yugoslavia, or the family backyard – might never have been the sites of effortless belonging as one had thought. The stories which follow here were all related to me in terms of sensory experience, where feeling at home is not necessarily a matter of dislocation caused by migration – being a strange body in a strange place – but a recognition that a familiar place can *become* strange at the moment when certain ways of being embodied become strange also.

## Sensible making visible

During the time that I was volunteering at the Bosnian supplementary school, I was gently but efficiently recruited to take part in a newly established weekend choir. The main driving force behind the choir project was a man called Nedim, whose plan was to build up a varied repertoire featuring not only popular Bosnian folk songs but also what he described to me as older pop songs that people would remember from 'back in the day'. This meant casting a wider net in terms of a shared regional cultural history – one of the first songs we rehearsed and offered to perform at a commemoration event was a popular track recorded in 1972 by a Croatian pop group, whose title was, incidentally, in Italian.

At one rehearsal, several weeks before the event where we were scheduled to perform, the choir was tackling a song that everyone (bar me) already knew, but which, unlike the Croatian song earlier, happened to be written in *ekavica*. A brief note of explanation: the language formerly known as Serbo-Croatian, which now exists as Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin (or 'BCS/M'), has three forms of pronunciation, although only two are used prominently. Many common words with the same meaning are thus pronounced differently in *ekavica* and in *ijekavica*.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the differences in pronunciation used to be largely regional when the language was still known as Serbo-Croatian, they too have now become political tools of differentiation (Longinović 2013), with *ekavica*, once more widely used in Serbia, becoming associated with Serbianness (as well as being widely used in Montenegro), while *ijekavica* is now mostly spoken in Croatia and all parts of Bosnia except Republika Srpska.<sup>5</sup>

One member of the choir raised her hand: were we planning to sing the song in *ekavica* or *ijekavica*? There was some hemming and hawing. Another singer, Amela, said that since she had first learned the lyrics in *ekavica*, she intended to sing them that way now.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, *ijekavica* inserts a soft 'j' sound, so that the word for 'sand' can be either 'pesak' in *ekavica* or 'pjesak' in *ijekavica*. For more on the use of language in the process of cultural and 'national' differentiation in the production of the independent successor states, see Longinović 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The Dayton Agreement of 1995 formally ended the Bosnian War, as well as dividing the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina into two autonomous political and territorial entities: Republika Srpska, with a predominantly Bosnian-Serb population, and Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine, inhabited mostly by Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks).

Nedim did not answer her directly, but turned to face me. “*Ekavica* is closer to how you would say things in Slovenian, isn’t it? But we tend to prefer *ijekavica* here – many people don’t much like *ekavica*, as you can imagine.”

When the choir rehearsed the song a second time, we did so in *ijekavica*, mentally changing the words on the lyrics sheet; although if one person had stuck with *ekavica*, I dare say it would have been quite difficult to notice. The rehearsal was light-hearted and relaxed, and as we were breaking up, Amela surveyed the room.

“We sounded good!” she exclaimed. “And just think: in this room we have Bosnians, a Herzegovinian, a Macedonian, and a Slovenian. We almost have a little former Yuga in this choir!”

What went unspoken was that this little former Yugoslavia was missing several republics, including both ‘a Serb’ and ‘a Croatian’, either of which might be the paradigmatic symbol of enmity within the context of the Bosnian War. I nevertheless left the rehearsal feeling buoyed by the camaraderie as well as by Amela’s reminiscence of a Yugoslav past within a space of Bosnian diasporic culture, which seemed to prove that such memories of conviviality could play a positive role in the present despite intervening ruptures.

Just over a year later, I was invited to a celebration of Statehood Day hosted by the Bosnian association of a neighbouring county. When I arrived Nedim greeted me with the unexpected news that the choir would be performing several songs, but told me not to worry, they were all our old standards. Amela had by then left the choir due to work obligations, but in the hallway I ran into Adi, another singer I had chatted to in the past but did not know particularly well. We struck up a conversation, which was interrupted once by two passing acquaintances who greeted each other with “salam!”, a casual greeting popular among the mostly Muslim Bosnian members of the organisation.

As they walked on, Adi shook his head and lowered his voice. “This must seem very strange to you,” he said. Religion used to be a private matter in Bosnia, he continued – and he thinks that people who really are religious don’t need to talk about it in public or make it political. What’s wrong with saying ‘good day’, anyway?

Adi and I sat down together and awaited the start of the program. When the choir was called upon to perform, we all went into a quick huddle to discuss our set. The question of pronunciation arose again when Nedim reminded us to sing that one particular song in *ijekavica*. In an almost exact repeat of last year's discussion, which he had been absent for, Adi noted that the song had originally been written in *ekavica*. This time, Nedim did not turn to me specifically but addressed the whole group with what struck me as a slightly forced smile: "Yes, but it was *ekavica* that forced me from my house!"

Since our audience was getting restless there was no time to arrive at a conclusion, and the matter was never quite resolved. It remained a small but irreconcilable difference between the memory of the song as it was meant to be sung – harking to a time when most Bosnians could easily switch between pronunciations at will – and Nedim's painful memory of being expelled from his house. His exclamation re-membered this past home with *ekavica*-speaking Serbian soldiers, giving the lie to the memory of an uncomplicated Yugoslav past. Here the memory reveals the shadow which must have resided in the home even when one had still thought it homey. At the same time, the context in which the song was sung already interpellates different visions of home: Bosnian Statehood Day marks the day in 1943 when the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) re-founded Bosnia and Herzegovina as a republic in the newly-established socialist federation. This legacy of the Yugoslav past in contemporary Bosnian political identity, especially when commemorated as a form of community-making on a sunny autumn weekend in south-eastern England, is a constant reminder of the shifting nature of the home(land) which is remembered collectively.

Nedim's stance on *ekavica*, however, also made it clearer to me how the visceral memory of home becoming uninhabitable can intervene in such collective projects. Happy to sing songs from across Yugoslavia, happy to come together and celebrate Bosnia in its complicated history, with a group of people who might not all entirely agree with him on what that home is or should be, Nedim waged a protest at the point where his memory of estrangement threatened to be swept aside in a vision of home he could no longer recognize. But there was some harmony to be found in disharmony that day: which lyrics people actually sung, either deliberately or because they accidentally followed the song as written, was largely drowned out by the ill-configured backing music.

In the course of fieldwork I encountered further stories of the home becoming strange. One such account came from Jovanka, who was born and raised in Belgrade and had left Yugoslavia to move to the United Kingdom for work in the late 1980s, several years before the first war broke out. “You see, we didn’t know there would be a war,” she told me when we met, stirring her cup of coffee. “We just couldn’t imagine something like that even happening.”

When it did happen, she went on, ‘they’ all asked themselves whether they had been living in a vacuum. The Belgrade of her youth was such a “cosmopolitan” city: perhaps people living elsewhere had an inkling, but no one from her circle was aware of any growing tensions. Jovanka did however have a very clear memory of visiting her parents in Serbia, once she and her family were already living in Britain:

One day, my father was walking across the garden with a transistor radio trying to catch Radio Zagreb, to hear everything he could [about the situation]. This was maybe in the ‘90s and I asked him to come inside: ‘Dad, please, they’ll think you’re an extra-terrestrial, or some kind of spy!’ But those waves could only be caught in one part of the garden and of course we all discussed everything, and... The disintegration of Yugoslavia first became visible in language.

Jovanka went on to describe how entirely new words started popping up in Croatia, which were supposedly based on older Slavic roots but in reality completely fictitious. As a teacher of Serbo-Croatian, she had to buy a new dictionary in order to translate some of the new words which were coming in over the radio.

Dwelling on the peculiarly cinematic image of a man criss-crossing a garden with a transistor radio while the neighbours look on in suspicion – whether an alien or a spy, a stranger by both names – I remembered another story I heard from a young man who had spent most of the Bosnian war in Sarajevo as a child. He told me he did not like how religious Bosnia had become after the war, and remembered being quite little the first time he saw someone praying: he was so confused about what was happening, and so worried that his grandfather was having some sort of epileptic fit, that he threw an apple at him.

The sensory experiences described in these memories all pinpoint a moment of change. They recall a point when the transformation of the once-familiar home became particularly visible, or otherwise sensible, and thus re-assess that home by acknowledging its contingency. Given the significance of language in the rapid disintegration of Yugoslavia, it is perhaps no coincidence that both Nedim and Jovanka recall language as a primary site of the familiar becoming strange. Yet the ways in which embodied sensory memory appears in these encounters – the way that a song is heard in the community centre against the memory of *ekavica*; elusive radio waves which make the Yugoslav disintegration “visible”; the sight of a grandfather praying, and even the haptic recollection of the thrown apple – binds the intimate means by which homes are inhabited to a shared narrative arc that describes home as always having been in flux.

### **Visible difference and familiar strangers**

On another autumn day, I sat down to conduct an interview with Azra, who I had by that point known for over a year. Azra came from a small town in the north-west of Bosnia and arrived in London in the mid-1990s as a refugee, joining her husband with their young child. That day I touched for the first time on what had seemed to her the most important difference when arriving in the United Kingdom. We had just been talking about growing up in Yugoslavia, so I asked whether having been raised in a socialist country presented a big change for her.

“No,” said Azra decidedly. For her personally, other things were much more important, capitalist country or not.

What was it that she noticed most, then?

“The democracy.”

Despite my expectations, Azra did not mean this as a reference to the British multi-party parliamentary system in contrast with a disintegrating socialist state. In the very next sentence, she described democracy as seeing “everyone” on the streets of London: a

woman wearing a burqa, a man from Jamaica. When I asked whether democracy to her meant some form of multiculturalism, she replied:

“Well, we had a version of multiculturalism in Bosnia. And the differences between us were much smaller, but it still didn’t work.”

In recounting her memory of seeing “everyone” on the streets of London as evidence of peaceful co-existence, in spite of ‘larger’ cultural differences than those she had known in Bosnia during Yugoslav times, Azra fashioned democracy into something capable of being seen. Democracy here resides in bodies that most clearly evoke difference: the racialized figures of the man from Jamaica, the woman in a burqa. In the memory of this first encounter with street-level conviviality, there are perhaps things that go unseen: the continued British legacy of post-colonial power relations, which always adapt to new regimes of differentiation; the systematic Islamophobia which haunts British Muslims as the potential enemy within; and the state-sanctioned violence against black male bodies taking place on many a street in London. At the same time, the sight in this recounted memory also serves to show that the “multiculturalism” that existed in Bosnia was never truly democratic, else it would not have ended as it did. As an answer to my question, then, Azra’s comments locate the most important difference between the place left behind and the place newly encountered in the memory of conviviality: both as that which had turned into violent estrangement in Bosnia, and as that which was still perceivable on the streets of Azra’s new home.

Fleeting though it was, this reference gave me pause, since it contradicted what I had expected to be her answer. In the moment when Azra said the word “democracy”, I assumed she was using the term in the sense it has been used by a parade of scholarly treatments on so-called post-socialist transition, as an end goal made elusive by ever-moving posts (Burawoy and Verdery 1999). It made me confront assumptions I did not quite realize I held, that memories of Yugoslavia would be recognizable as such by constituting memories of a *system*, whether seen in a positive or negative light. This moment of cognitive dissonance in my conversation with Azra – the moment between ‘democracy’ and ‘burqa’ – prompted me to look for different ways in other conversations by which the past experience of home might manifest itself.



The initial encounter with a new home, however, can also change over time into a form of familiarity, a new hominess that comes to be contrasted with the old. Azra once told me that her then-teenage sons had complained, after spending several weeks in Bosnia on a summer break, that they missed being home in London: “they were bored, they missed curry, and they missed seeing black people.” The lack of an expected and familiar sight – or smell – cast a different light on the familiarity of the parental homeland. At the same time, Azra added, much of this has become normal for her as well. She remembered coming to England for the first time, when they were staying in a refugee hostel with a number of families from Sri Lanka, and smelling for the first time all those cooking scents that were unknown to her. They seemed so strong to her at first, but now she is completely used to them.

“That’s integration for you,” she finished, “getting used to smells!”

There were also other ways in which intimacy and estrangement were narrated in terms of encounters with visible (and often racialized) forms of otherness. Amela, the woman who once attended the choir, told me the story of seeing a “black woman” outside her local shop who failed to clean up after her dog. Amela muttered something insulting in Bosnian: “luckily, I didn’t say anything about her being black!” It turned out that the man who was with the dog owner, also black, clarified Amela, smilingly replied in the same language, whereupon it turned out that he had studied in Belgrade before the war. This largely positive encounter – Amela added that the man lives on the same estate as her and that they wave hello occasionally – was later accompanied by another anecdote, in which Amela recalled using racially charged insults to respond to a woman on the bus who told her and her son to ‘go back home’.

On another occasion I was visiting Nada, an acquaintance from a folk dance class, and was introduced to her adult daughter Marina. The three of us were chatting about language, and how in London you never know when you will be understood by a passing stranger; although less so than in Vienna, where “every second person on the street is one of our people”, as Nada put it.

Marina then related her own story of meeting “a black man” in London, who had also studied in Belgrade and who chatted with her in Serbo-Croatian. But when I mentioned that

I now find it very strange to return to Slovenia and be reminded of how white it is, Marina confided that although she had been raised in Yugoslavia to think of everyone as equal regardless of skin colour, and was taught at school that black people the world over had been oppressed throughout history, her attitude changed a little when she came to the United Kingdom. She had had some experiences, she said, which really made her wonder whether that was true...

Marina's and Amela's memories of encountering unexpected intimacy in the form of a visible stranger necessitated a re-thinking of where and how familiarity might be embodied, as well as implicating the various histories of journeys which had placed both 'the black man' and the speaker on the same street, whether in Belgrade or in London. At the same time, this familiarity did not necessarily extend or translate into encounters with other 'Others', as evidenced by Amela's meeting on the bus; or as in Marina's case, the abstract tolerant sensibility taught 'at home' might start to unravel in the course of inhabiting a diaspora space. My own discomfort at some of these exchanges, entangled in my complicit role as confidante on the basis of the assumption that I was "one of our people", came as a reminder that re-assessing the past home as more heterogeneous than first assumed may not necessarily lead to a more liberatory or convivial stance toward racialized forms of difference.

### **Feeling the way to a methodology**

The encounter with a situated, present-day act of homing – such as singing songs one used to sing in a London community centre, or walking down the street – can precipitate a journey of memory to a past home, which emerges as less homey, less easily and more precariously inhabited than a home understood as the "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (Ahmed 2000: 89) left behind through a migratory movement. Since the 'home' in question is removed not only by virtue of physical distance but by an imbrication of spaces and times, of the past as a place one was able to inhabit at a particular moment, 'place' and 'memory' might indeed be seen as analogous: neither of them allow for a return to a fixed point, or even to a sense of fixity that could be repeatedly re-visited from the point of being 'away'. Thus the memory of the past home, despite the frequent

emphasis on remembering the homeland that was deployed in commemorative or pedagogical contexts within my interlocutors' projects of diasporic community making, cannot quite locate a stable referent: an effortlessly inhabitable home, which did not undergo the violent process of differentiation that evicted Nedim from his house, nor the realisation that the idea of democracy which Azra had grown up with was unable to hold up to continued coexistence of 'small differences'. What matters here is that memory does not and cannot return one to an ontologically homey home; yet all the same, the act of re(-)membering, by making visible the fact that the past home was never fixed and never stable, might be able to assert an individual's ability to know it as never fixed, never stable. In other words, by evoking what is sensible about this home or another, one can also become sensible of its implications.

It is in this way, I would suggest, that we might think about methodologies of migrant memory: as the space of possibility for seeing differently that is provoked by encounters between different memories of homing. The fragments of stories I have heard, peppered with continuous references to the spaces and times that people have inhabited, are telling in their minute evocations. The very sensory recollections of *what can be seen* – heard, smelled, sensed – becomes part and parcel of the way in which home is lived as well as the way in which it might no longer be lived as home at all. This estrangement of home need not necessarily be a result of migration; yet the experience of migration, and the diverse embodied ideologies of who belongs where that it so frequently represents, becomes integral to the articulation of those journeys of memory that go beyond any dichotomy of homeland and host land. Inevitably, these stories also implicate a number of collective gestures that they may or may not intend to evoke: those state-based and global policies, both past and present, which enable certain possibilities of movement and define lines of national inclusivity; the structures of inequality and possibilities for solidarity which open up within them; the largely invisible practices that construct and fix space, until memories armed with other expectations of fixity come to unsettle them. In order to think about migration and memory in terms of such encounters rather than as a crossing of fixed territorial borders, we as researchers may merely need to illuminate the work that memory already does: create possibilities for disrupting the assumed stability of places by foregrounding the contingency in their collective visions of normality.

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